

May 1937

tree of knowledge

The Tree of Knowledge, Tarkiln,
Duxbury, Massachusetts

In the early Colonial days, how far back is not known with any accuracy, it was customary to leave messages or letters at an oak tree standing at the junction of the Massachusetts Bay Path (now Route 3) and the road running through Tinkertown. This Massachusetts Bay Path was the westerly one of the two Kings Highways laid out in 1685 soon after Plymouth and the Massachusetts colonies were united, the other Kings Highway leading to Scituate and the other shore towns.

The Duxbury road or the one through Tinkertown was not laid out till 1763, so while a few letters or parcels might have been left at this tree at the junction before this time to be picked up by the "Runner" between Plymouth and Boston, it could at best have been only haphazard and desultory.

In 1775 the first Post Office was established at Plymouth ^{by} ~~in~~ the Provincial Congress and mounted mail carriers made regular trips between Plymouth and Boston and as the Tinkertown route was laid out by this time it is safe to assume that a mail box was nailed on this tree for the convenience of to and from Boston mail and the connecting mail from Duxbury.

From this time, 1775, the tree became known as the "Tree of Knowledge" and its fame spread through^{out} Duxbury and the surrounding neighborhood.

As in the earlier Colonial days when the settlers were from necessity deserting Plymouth and spreading out toward Duxbury and Green Harbor, afterwards Marshfield, to find pasturage for their rapidly increasing cattle, much of the mail until the Revolution

and the establishment of a post office was carried to Boston from Plymouth by packets. We run across references to mail thus carried in old letters and diaries. Paper was scarce and expensive and of a coarse variety. Envelopes were almost unknown. The paper ^{was} folded to form an envelope. It was expensive to send letters any appreciable distance and altogether correspondence without the aid of modern methods was a considerable task.

From the time of the establishment of the first Post Office in Plymouth, May 12, 1775, and the starting of the first mail route from Cambridge to Plymouth, Sandwich and Falmouth in June of the same year, the era of modern mail facilities may be said to have fairly begun. At this time the Provincial Congress appointed William Watson, Postmaster and Timothy Goodwin and Joseph Howland joint post riders.

In 1796 post riders were abandoned and stages were used for tri-weekly trips between Plymouth and Boston. These stages left Boston at five A.M. and passed through Dorchester, Quincy, Weymouth Landing, West Scituate, Hanover, Pembroke, West Duxbury and Plymouth. The return trip was begun at two P.M., the stages carrying two pouches, one for through and the other for local mail.

The writer has talked with an octogenarian whose father as a boy carried the mail on horseback from Duxbury over the Tinkertown road to the Tree of Knowledge. This was in the early eighteen hundreds, twenty-five years after the inauguration of post offices and a mail route. It may not be historically correct to label this the first Rural Delivery in America since the first mounted post was established in 1673 running from New York to Boston. But this was a private and not a government project and even if in the one hundred years elapsing between this line and the establishment of the Post Office

Department there were connecting routes for delivering and collecting mail, they could not be considered Rural Delivery as understood today. At least it may be safely affirmed that it was one of the first Rural Deliveries after the Post Office Department was established, although probably it was not free for the riders from Duxbury had to be paid by those most interested.

The stage coaches ran for fifty years, from 1796 to 1845, when the railroad was built from Boston to Plymouth. It is not definitely known when the oak tree perished although tradition has it that it was struck by lightning. But perish it did for there exists no sign of it at the present day. To be sure the site is marked but the wooden tablet erected by the Duxbury Rural Society some years ago does not mark the site of the old oak tree which ^{was} ~~is~~ west of the road. Still it makes little difference for time has changed completely the old surroundings. There exists no vestige of the old sandy road over which the coach, drawn by four horses, was brought up along side the Tree and to make matters worse recently the State road (Route 3) has been straightened and passes to the west of the site of the old Tree on the way to Kingston.

However, the approximate site has been marked for many years and at least five markers painted by local artists have been erected. Two painted by Mrs. Frederick N. Knapp of Plymouth and Miss Grace Waterman of ~~Kingston~~ ^{Duxbury} depicted the mounted carrier delivering the mail from Duxbury, while the present one by the late Mrs. Fanny B. Clark of South Duxbury represents the mail coach and four spirited horses starting from the Tree.

Mr. Wendell Phillips, a descendent of the famous orator, and for two decades one of Duxbury's selectmen, may be said to be the patron saint of the Tree of Knowledge. He has been a life long resident in

the neighborhood and is well versed in the history of the Tree and has even written a poem about it which has been privately printed for distribution to his friends. Beginning with the fifth stanza the oak speaks

"I was a sturdy oak,
O'er me the whirlwinds broke.
I felt the tempest's stroke,
The thunder pealing."

and so on, the oak still speaking

"A box they nailed on me,
Here was the "Knowledge Tree",
Here, the first R.F. D.
This country using."
Fainter his arms he throw,
Weaker his spirit grew,
The theme could not pursue,
The voice grew jaded.
"See that thou marks't the spot,
See that I'm not forgot,
Else cursed shall be thy lot."
The form then faded.
And while the sign stands there,
Bearing the legend fair,
Tended with loving care,
No curse we're dreading.

Thus the legend about "all will be well" so long as the site of the Tree of Knowledge is marked.

While the members of the Tercentenary Committee can not be said to be superstitious, it is just as well to be on the safe side. Thus the site of the Tree of Knowledge will be marked in granite, with a suitable inscription on both sides, so that those coming from the southwest and north may read. And it is hoped that the curse will be averted for the next 300 years.

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